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Officials Say C.I.A. Knew Little Of Iran When Arms Sales Started

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 22 — The United States began its covert arms shipments to Iran despite scant American intelligence about its internal political situation, according to Government officials.

The officials said that from the fall of Shah Riza Pahlavi until mid-1985, when the covert dealings were first discussed, the Central Intelligence Agency failed to develop any agents with access to the inner circle of Iranian politics. "We have had nothing going in Iran," said one Administration official.

One indication that the C.I.A. had little in the way of Iran experts on its staff was that the agency was forced to summon out of retirement an operative who spoke Persian to work on the covert project. The former agency employee, who was paid \$40,000, was involved in some of the most sensitive aspects of the project. He traveled with Robert C. McFarlane, the former national security adviser, when he went to Teheran in May for meetings with Iranian officials, according to a one source.

Israeli officials said Friday that they were also without reliable information about the situation in Iran until they initiated a relationship in 1985 with Manucher Ghorbanisar, an Iranian arms dealer said to have access to the country's Prime Minister.

Critics See a Misunderstanding

Critics of the Administration's policy toward Iran, in Congress and elsewhere, contend that senior American policy makers based their decisions on a misunderstanding of how the Teheran Government functions. The Administration has said it was trying to contact "moderates" within the Khomeini regime, but Congressional critics and experts outside the Administration have questioned whether any such strain exists.

Additionally, some within the Admin-

istration not involved in covert dealings have questioned the wisdom of relying upon arms dealers — who have an obvious self-interest in furthering the sales — for crucial contacts and intelligence. Intelligence agencies routinely use arms dealers for gathering information since such "assets," as they are called, often have access to significant information about a host of countries.

The Central Intelligence Agency has run several previous covert programs aimed at Iran, including an ongoing effort to assist anti-Khomeini Iranian exile groups. But officials characterized the quality of intelligence obtained from this operation as "low grade." Another covert operation in Iran occurred in 1982, when the C.I.A. delivered to the Khomeini Government the names of Soviet agents in the Tudeh Party, Iran's Communist party.

The Soviet defector who provided the names had served in Teheran for the Soviet Union. But his flight to the West was arranged by British intelligence, which subsequently allowed the C.I.A. to share in the fruits of the operation, according to Government officials.

Role of the C.I.A.

The Administration's accounts of the Iran dealings have assigned differing weight to the role of the C.I.A. Adm. John Poindexter, the national security advisor, said on Nov. 14 that William J. Casey, the director of Central Intelligence, "has some very good people involved in this project." He then added, "I wish I hadn't said that on the record."

That same day, Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, said: "The operational details were assigned to the National Security Council. The N.S.C. conducted the operational details in conjunction with the C.I.A. Every contact that was made, there was a representative of the N.S.C. and C.I.A. present."

But a Government official today characterized the C.I.A. role as "minimal" and said the White House staffs was trying to overstate the agency's role to deflect some of the continuing criticism. A Congressional official familiar with Mr. Casey's briefing of Congress on Friday said the director had portrayed the operation as largely run by the N.S.C. staff, with some assistance on details provided by the agency.

One sign that the agency was working hard to develop new contacts in Iran as the secret talks moved forward was the arrest of Jon Pattis, an American telecommunications engineer in Iran.

According to IRNA, the official Iranian press agency, Mr. Pattis confessed that he had been asked by the agency in early 1986 to gather information on Iran's oil exports from Kharg Island and the amount of damage caused to the installation by Iraqi bombing runs.

The request, if the IRNA account is accurate, was made at roughly the same time that the United States began its secret talks with Iran. A key component of those talks, Administration officials said, was Iran's fear of Iraqi air strikes and its desire to buy spare parts that would allow its American-made Hawk missile batteries to become operational again. Knowledge of how much damage the air strikes were doing would be helpful to those negotiating with Iran.

The C.I.A. has refused to comment on the Pattis case, and Administration officials declined to say whether he had been a C.I.A. asset.

The use of Mr. Ghorbanisar, and his precise role in the arms dealings, is one of the issues that Congressional committees are expected to explore more fully in coming months. Mr. Ghorbanisar was used as an intermediary from the beginning of the contacts until this year, but Government officials said he was subsequently cut out of the operation after the United States developed its own channel to deal directly with figures in Iran.